

# Prison tour provides real-life experience

I kept searching my mind — replaying the memory of seeing their faces — looking for meaning.

Forty-some students from West Texas A&M toured the Neal Unit prison before the holiday break. They were part of a criminal justice class that had something to do with learning about prisoners. Three prisoners, including myself, were asked to speak to them about our lives, crimes and what led us to prison. They listened, asked questions, stared — then it ended.

I walked away wondering, what did they learn?

Did they learn about prison life?

We shared with them our daily routines, how we stay busy to help pass the time and have the faith that even in prison we can serve a greater purpose. Of course, the horrors of prison life came up, but so did the



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loneliness of doing time. That loneliness is felt more when we are sorry for the wrong we have done, and we realize that time has changed us — for the better — in spite of who we are. But with that loneliness comes peace.

Did they learn about college life? They laughed when we told them that the staple of our commissary diet was much like their college diet — Ramen noodle soup. They seemed shocked to know that some of us had decent lives before coming to prison, and they seemed uncomfortable when they found out the nature of our crimes. This is what textbooks can't express — the reality that the same thing that makes you laugh can make you cry.

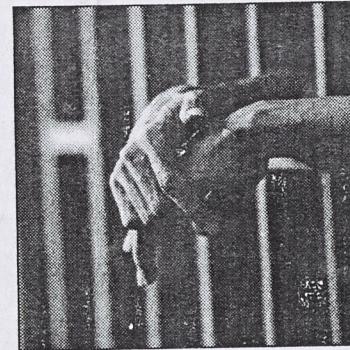
I was once in their seats, listening to another me in another time, and now I'm here. Some of us didn't prepare for prison. Some of us didn't prepare for

college, but we all chose to be where we were that day.

Did they learn about real life? I shared with them some of my life journey before I came to prison. My aspirations, similar to some of theirs, led me to graduate from college, serve in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, work in our nation's capital and experience life in other parts of the world. But what I didn't experience in all of my freedom I came to know in this single imprisonment — real life, life on the inside of who I was, who I am and who I am becoming.

The hustle and bustle of life's accomplishments can sometimes blind us, and set us in search of something or someone that has been with us all along.

Searching for meaning sometimes takes us to college, sometimes to prison — but it always brings us back to the real life within us. Learning about ourselves is aided when we take time to understand the other



that stands before us — who is also looking for meaning.

We are dealing with human lives on both sides of the prison fence, and we can be agents of positive change both inside and outside of prison. We can be the difference in a person's life — whether he goes to college or prison — and we don't have to wait or look to someone else to do what God is willing to do through us. This, I hope they learned.

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